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Re: *UNC Concussion Research Program*

Dear UNC Executive Leaders,

As national and international leaders in the concussion research community, we are writing to you in response to an article that appeared in *The Athletic* on October 8, 2019. It is our unified position that this article made numerous baseless and unfounded criticisms against UNC faculty member Dr. Kevin Guskiewicz, the UNC Matthew Gfeller Sport-Related TBI Research Center, and the larger concussion research community that we represent. Our aim in this unsolicited communication is to provide you with a factual account that refutes claims made by *The Athletic*.

As you are aware, the piece in *The Athletic* stems from a prior publication in June 2019 entitled "*Cognitive Deficits and LD/ADHD Among Incoming College Football Athletes: Legal and Medical Implications of Undisclosed Inclusion in Concussion Research.*" Of note, this article was published in volume 1, issue 1 of the *Journal of Scientific Practice and Integrity (JoSPI)*, which to date remains the only published issue of this journal. To our knowledge, neither of the authors are recognized experts in our field, and we seriously question whether they have the subject matter expertise in either concussion or LD/ADHD that would qualify them to author a paper on this complex topic. Therefore, we consider the original source of *The Athletic* article to be highly questionable, at best. It definitely should not be considered of the same caliber as the high-quality work that UNC faculty have become known for in concussion research over the past 25 years.

Most importantly, we consider the allegations of "scientific misconduct" made by the authors of these articles to be preposterous, patently false, and potentially actionable. The claims made by these unqualified authors about LD/ADHD are not substantiated by evidence and are not widely accepted in our community. To clarify, it has not been and is not currently common practice to exclude athletes with ADHD/LD from concussion research studies. In fact, a large-scale systematic review on predictors of recovery from concussion published in the *British Journal of Sports Medicine* determined that "*those with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) or learning disabilities do not appear to be at substantially greater risk*" of longer recovery.<sup>1</sup> As evidence of their lack of subject matter

expertise, the authors of the JoSPI paper relied on research from 20 years ago that initially raised issues around ADHD/LD and concussion, but which the predominance of data reported in the BJSM paper has since refuted.

The allegations in the recent media piece in no way render prior work by UNC faculty or the larger concussion research community “invalid”, as suggested by The Athletic. The published studies by UNC faculty, and our larger research community, have followed accepted standards in the field and were conducted with the highest rigor and integrity. Further, the original research papers by UNC faculty cited by The Athletic all underwent rigorous peer review before publication in reputable, high impact scientific journals.

Notably, Dr. Walter Koroshetz, Director of the National Institute of Health (NIH) National Institute of Neurologic Disorders and Stroke (NINDS) responded to the latest media piece by stating that Dr. Guskiewicz and UNC faculty “*have the highest integrity in terms of the science that they do.*” This is an incredibly powerful statement from NIH leadership who is charged with critically evaluating the quality of neurologic research on a daily basis and who sets the national agenda for neurologic research. It also casts major doubt on the credibility of the articles in JoSPI and The Athletic.

The Athletic did, however, manage to get a few things right. First, Dr. Guskiewicz is a universally respected and beloved member of our community. Second, the Matthew Gfeller Sport-Related TBI Research Center is recognized world-wide as a leading center of excellence in concussion research. Third, work by Dr. Guskiewicz and UNC faculty has directly informed international consensus guidelines that improved health and safety for athletes at all competitive levels around the world. Finally, Dr. Guskiewicz and UNC faculty are universally respected for the quality, rigor, and integrity of their work.

In closing, we know Dr. Guskiewicz and all UNC faculty involved in concussion research to be of the highest ethics, integrity and honor. Dr. Guskiewicz’s dedicated leadership at your institution, his impact on academic medicine over the past 25 years, and his record of service to our international community are direct testaments of his character. We have every confidence that, under Dr. Guskiewicz’s leadership, UNC will continue to do groundbreaking research that has a major positive impact on science, medicine and public health around the globe for years to come.

Please feel free to contact Dr. Michael McCrea ([mmccrea@mcw.edu](mailto:mmccrea@mcw.edu)) as a point of contact for our group if you would like to discuss further.

Sincerely,

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Review. PMID: 28566342. <https://bjsm.bmj.com/content/51/12/941>

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